DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 434 384 EA 030 045

AUTHOR Goyne, June; Padgett, Dara; Rowicki, Mark A.; Triplitt, Tom
TITLE The Journey to Teacher Empowerment.
PUB DATE 1999-08-00
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Administration; Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; *Organizational Change; *Participative Decision Making; *School Administration; *Teacher Empowerment; Teacher Role; *Teachers

ABSTRACT

This paper describes ways that administrators can empower teachers and build strong, effective teams in a school. It opens by defining power and explains that traditional organizational hierarchical structures tend to motivate people to use power in self-protective ways. It claims that for empowerment to work, leaders must help people use their power creatively and collaboratively for good. The article examines pitfalls in implementing an empowerment agenda, such as announcing a new philosophy and then doing nothing to implement it, and shares some precautions that need to be taken when empowering teachers through shared decision-making. Teachers' decisions should carry some relevance for them, and administrators must avoid giving teachers responsibility for a decision with no corresponding power to implement the decision. Leaders should address their own fears and assume that most people, when empowered, will invest more of themselves and function at a higher, more creative level. The paper lists the three keys to empowerment: share information with everyone, replace old hierarchies with self-directed teams, and create autonomy through boundaries. It also outlines the six dimensions of teacher empowerment: shared decision making, teacher professional development, teacher status, teacher self-efficacy, teacher autonomy, and teacher impact. (RJM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

RUNNING HEAD: The Journey To Teacher Empowerment

ED 434 384

The Journey to Teacher Empowerment

Auburn University

June Goyne, Dara Padgett, Mark A. Rowicki, Tom Triplitt

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

M. Rowicki

1

EA 030045

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The Journey To Teacher Empowerment

Introduction

During the last decade, site-based management has been the buzzword in schools across the country. Put the decision-making at the lowest level and let those who are in a position to carry out those decisions be responsible for making them. It is based on the very popular leadership and management concept of "empowerment." The concept of teacher empowerment is covered in many different management strategies—facilitative management, shared decision-making, local control, collaborative leadership, and others. The concept is an excellent one for giving teachers an added sense of ownership and connectedness to their jobs. Anticipated benefits include increased job satisfaction, increased motivation and commitment, improved communication, more efficient decision-making, and improved quality. Empower the principals and teachers, release their untapped talents, and let them carry the ball. Why, then, has it not universally succeeded? To answer this question, it is necessary to first understand the concept of "power" as it relates to human beings and to explore the concept of "empowerment" applied to people within organizations.

What Is Empowerment?

Lucas (1998) defines power as "…a human force for achievement or obstruction that can be used individually or collectively for the constructive good, or destruction, of other people and organizations" (p. 13). He contends that a leader cannot really "give" power to people because they already have innate power. However, the traditional organizational hierarchical structure actually tends to motivate people to use their power in self-protective ways that do nothing for personal or organizational growth. For example, when a mistake occurs in most organizations, is the priority to fix it and improve the system to prevent similar mistakes in the future, or is it to

find someone to blame so "heads can roll"? If it is the latter, people will use their power to hide mistakes and protect themselves and their jobs. If it is the former, personal power can be used to fix the mistake and work with others to improve the system.

Empowerment is a process rather than a product---a journey rather than a destination (Blanchard, Carlos, & Randolph, 1996). It is a change in attitude that starts at the top and filters throughout an organization. Short & Greer (1997) claim empowerment in education is a process where participative decision-making takes place. Blanchard, Carlos, and Randolph (1996) describe empowerment as simply letting people use the power they have always had. It is both of these things and more. If empowerment is going to work, it is the leader's job to release the power within people while creating an environment that fosters using their power creatively and collaboratively for good (Blanchard, Carlos, and Randolph, 1996). But changing from a traditional structure to one in which empowerment actually works is not as simple a task as it seems. How does the leader actually create an "empowered work environment" in which innovations such as site-based management can really work?

Pitfalls

Short (1998) states that school change can happen only when participants in a school are empowered and feel a true sense of ownership. Teachers need to feel empowered and need to learn how to function in this new environment before they can participate effectively in the shared leadership of the school (Laud, 1998; Blanchard et al., 1996). Administrators are the key to creating an environment conducive to empowerment, but they often have no idea how to go about it.

One common pitfall is to announce the new philosophy and sit back, waiting for people to act empowered and be free and creative. When results are not immediate and dramatic, many

leaders see the idea as a failure and revert back to "business as usual." At the other extreme are administrators who announce the new philosophy but through their actions (whether consciously or not), ensure that any new structure put in place still funnels all real decision making back to the top. It is a bureaucracy by a new name. They, too, see no results and label the idea a failure. Both leaders have failed to address what Blanchard et al. calls the "three keys" to empowerment. Before addressing these keys, however, leaders must first closely and honestly examine their beliefs, values and fears.

There are some precautions that need to be taken when empowering teachers through shared decision-making. Two of the main causes of problems in trying to empower teachers are having them involved in areas where they have no real stake and giving them the authority to make decisions with no power behind it. These two problems could be described as lack of interest and giving responsibility with no power.

First, the decisions the teachers are involved in need to have a certain level of relevance for them. If the outcome of the decision is not important to them, or not in an area that they feel responsible for, the teachers are not likely to put much thought into their decision. Consequently, they are less likely to devote quality time and effort to follow-up and evaluation of their decision. For example, if a school is remodeling its cafeteria, the principal, in an effort at empowerment, might decide to involve the teachers in the selection of new kitchen equipment. But most teachers do not have the level of expertise needed to make such a decision effectively. Not only do they not have the expertise, they would probably not have a very high degree of concern about the issue. This low level of concern would cause them not to devote sufficient time and energy to the decision-making process (Hoy and Miskel, 1987). This low level of concern, caused by the fact

that they do not feel connected to the outcome, could lead to unforeseen long-term problems. Such an example is a waste of the use of empowerment.

The biggest danger associated with teacher empowerment is the illusion of power. The illusion of power comes from giving teachers the responsibility for a decision and no corresponding power to implement the decision. This type of action will quickly kill any benefits of empowerment in an organization. The teachers may feel that the principal is not willing to make the decision so he lets them make it and then allows them to suffer the consequences. The best example in many school systems is a department head. A department head may be responsible for supervising teachers, interviewing prospective teachers, ordering supplies, and counseling teachers when there is a problem with instruction or classroom management. But in spite of having these responsibilities, he or she has no real power to make any changes. The department head cannot hire or fire personnel; the teacher still answers to the principal; and the department budget is set by someone else. The department head may get a bit of a pay increase or an extra planning period for his/her duties, but the real power needed for effective decision-making rests with the principal. Such a situation makes the department head position a thankless job and explains why most schools rotate them among various teachers in the department from year to year. Machiavelli wrote: "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." In the case of teacher empowerment: Powerlessness corrupts and absolute powerlessness corrupts absolutely.

Leader's Beliefs, Values and Fears

Some leaders want empowerment to work, but deep down they believe people do not really want the responsibility that comes with empowerment. They do not trust people to rise to the occasion and be willing to put more of themselves into their work. For empowerment to

work, the leader must at least operate on the assumption that most people, given the opportunity, will invest more of themselves and function at a higher more creative level.

A common fear of leaders is loss of control, especially when they are still held accountable by those above them. They equate "power" with "control" and fear that giving up any degree of control will strip them of power. In fact, giving up some control can actually enhance leaders' power. They take on new roles and become facilitators and coaches, working "for" their employees to help them be more effective. Empowering teachers does not mean administrators relinquish the authority and responsibility that accompany their title and position. Rather, it means they share power with the people who are responsible for helping them make and implement decisions about changes within the school. Lucas (1998) uses the term "powersharing," rather than empowerment, to capture this belief. He describes powersharing as a process in which a leader takes measures to encourage the use of constructive power and to limit the use of destructive power.

Three Keys To Empowerment

Share information with everyone. Performance information about the company must be shared with everyone to help people understand the business. This first step is essential in beginning to build trust. It sets the tone for eliminating hierarchical thinking and thereby fosters a sense of ownership in everyone. This means sharing information previously protected and guarded as only necessary for "those at the top," including budgets and other sensitive material. The administrator who freely makes organizational information available to everyone is not only giving them essential data required for making sound decisions, but is also sending a strong message that they are viewed as trustworthy and thinking people.

Replace the old hierarchy with self-directed teams. Self-directed teams are an important organizational strategy for empowerment. Leaders, however, must provide direction and staff development for empowered teams to help them learn to function within this new paradigm. Skills such as team-building and conflict-resolution, which were not needed in the old "do as you are told" hierarchy, must be developed to foster collaboration in figuring out how to reach common goals.

Create autonomy through boundaries. The old system cannot be removed without replacing it with a structure that is supportive of a new way of working. Mistakenly, administrators seeking to empower teachers may begin to view all structure as "bad" and "restrictive," but a total lack of structure leaves the workforce floundering without a sense of direction. Instead, boundaries should be created by clarifying the vision, goals, and values of the organization and by defining the roles and rules of its members. When first launching an empowerment strategy, the leader will have to provide a great deal of structure but will gradually give more control for defining boundaries to teams as they learn to function better.

Six Dimensions of Teacher Empowerment

Traditionally, teachers were in charge of their classrooms but worked within the constraints of their administrator's instructions. The day-to-day operations and decisions about the school were left to administrators who informed teachers about their decisions (Short & Greer, 1997). This idea of how to run a school is vanishing and being replaced by a concept known as empowerment or, more specifically, *teacher empowerment*. However, this concept does not happen overnight. Building on the three keys to empowerment, it takes a commitment from school administrators to support and encourage their faculty to experience the following six dimensions of teacher empowerment (Short, 1994).

Shared decision making. The first dimension according to Short (1994) is allowing teachers to participate in critical decisions affecting their work. Teachers should have a voice in decisions about school budgets, assignments, and curriculum. Moreover, this input needs to be genuinely accepted. Short & Greer (1997) state that when teachers feel their input is ignored by administrators who do not listen, or who listen and then make their own decisions, the teachers tend to be less willing to participate. When teachers have a say in what happens, on the other hand, their ability to solve problems improves and benefits the entire school.

Teacher professional development. Professional growth is the second dimension and an area of increasing concern in the educational system. Teachers need to continue developing their skills and learn all they can about their profession as well as learn new skills for working in an empowered environment. Administrators who support professional development enhance their school's effectiveness because of improved instruction and teacher commitment (Short & Greer, 1997).

Teacher status. The third dimension of empowerment is teacher status. Teacher status within both the school and the community affects how teachers perceive themselves and, in doing so, affects their ability to teach. Teachers need to feel they are respected both in and out of school, especially in light of the current level of criticism and decreasing public support for their profession (Short, 1994).

Teacher Self-efficacy. Short & Greer (1997) call the fourth dimension self-efficacy. Teachers need to believe they can do their job and make a difference. "Self-efficacy develops as an individual acquires self-knowledge and the belief that they are personally competent and have mastered the skills necessary to effect desired outcomes (Short & Greer, 1997, p. 138). When

teachers believe in themselves and feel competent about their abilities, their confidence carries over into the classroom.

Teacher autonomy. Short (1994) also discusses autonomy, the fifth dimension of teacher empowerment. She states that a teacher's belief that they have control of their work leads them to make decisions and to be more willing to take risks. "Schools that create environments that support risk taking and experimentation by teachers also build teachers' sense of autonomy" (Short & Greer, 1997, p. 138). Autonomous teachers are more willing to try new ideas in their classrooms, help their students, and augment their teaching.

Teacher impact. Finally, we get to impact, which refers to a teacher's belief that they affect or influence the life of the school (Short & Greer, 1997). Teachers want to know that they have made a difference. There are many ways an administrator can help teachers feel their efforts are worthwhile. First and foremost, they can offer simple compliments. In schools, according to Short (1994), complaints outnumber the compliments. Administrators can also recognize student achievement. By recognizing student achievement we are also recognizing the teachers who made the achievement possible.

Empowerment and Responsibility

Administrators would do well to emphasize these six dimensions in their schools. However, Short (1997) states that it is imperative that administrators are explicit and direct in conveying that empowerment and responsibility go hand-in-hand. Teachers need to understand they are assuming greater responsibility along with greater power. They should be encouraged to take risks and try new ideas, but also know that honest mistakes or failures will be viewed as learning opportunities for personal and organizational growth.

Administrators must also honestly determine the limits of their willingness to share power within the school and then convey those limits to their faculty. Empowerment is sharing the leadership role, not giving it away.

One final suggestion for administrators serious about empowering their teachers is to watch their communication skills. Although they may be serious and committed to empowering their faculty, how they communicate could convey a different message. For example, Laud (1998) discusses a situation where she, as an administrator, conveyed a hesitance to share control and to trust that more autonomy would improve teacher effectiveness. When a teacher wanted to address the faculty, Laud immediately wanted details and started imparting her knowledge on the subject. Her actions implied that she was more expert than the teacher and failed to support the teacher's willingness to get involved in the school's operation. In essence, through her actions she said, "I do not trust you." Effective communication skills can enhance an administrator's efforts to empower teachers, and improvement of these skills may be a vital step for an administrator wishing to foster empowerment.

Conclusion

Empowerment is an excellent way for administrators to build strong, effective teams within a school. Through the dimensions of empowerment, especially autonomy, administrators can "… capitalize on strengths that emerge from each group, allowing individual teachers to find a team unity with which they are comfortable, and encourage an atmosphere of creativity and risk taking" (Pollak & Mills, 1997, p. 29). Strong teams combine the strengths, ideas, unity, and cooperation to form a powerful tool in teaching students the skills and competencies they need.

The idea of sharing leadership in a school can be frightening to an administrator whose only experience has been to make all the decisions and assume responsibility for those decisions. It can be equally frightening to teachers whose only experience has been to teach and leave all the decision making to the administrator(s). But the old adage that two heads are better than one can assume a different meaning when schools combine the thoughts, ideas, skills, and experiences of the entire staff to collaboratively run a school. The key is providing the right environment, training, and support to help newly empowered teachers achieve success.

References

Blanchard, K., Carlos, J., and Randolph, A. (1996) Empowerment takes more than a minute. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

Hoy, W. K. & Miskel, C. G. (1987). Decision making. In Educational administration: Theory, research, and practice, 3rd ed. New York: Random House. 316-351.

Laud, L. (1998). Changing the way we communicate. Educational Leadership, 55(7). 23-25.

Lucas, James. R. (1998). Balance of power. New York: Amacom (American Managmement Association).

Pollak, J, & Mills, R. (1997). True collaboration: building and maintaining successful teams. Schools in the Middle, 6(5). 28-32.

Short, P. (1998). Empowering leadership. Contemporary Education, 69(2). 70-72.

Short, P. & Greer, J. (1997). Leadership in empowered schools. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc.